

North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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The Honorable William Daley
U.S. Secretary of Commerce
14th & Constitution Avenues NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Daley:

I am writing to seek your help for our crab industry off Alaska. The industry is in jeopardy because of recent downturns in Bering Sea crab stocks. The opilio fishery, for example, which previously harvested around 200 million pounds, was allowed only 28 million pounds this year, and likely will be closed in coming years. We have license limitation for the crab fisheries, but significant excess harvesting capacity still exists. The bottom line is that the critically low levels of crab abundance can no longer support the current fleet.

At our April meeting, the Council discussed with industry how to further address this excess capacity problem. We envision a two-step process. First, we ask you to seek congressional assistance to support a vessel buyback program using a combination of appropriations, federal loans, and modifications of the Capital Construction Fund as appropriate. Though the attached tables show the number of crab vessels qualified in 2000 to be about 470, many of those hold interim, non-transferable licenses that may not qualify after final appeals are settled. So about 300 vessels may be granted permanent licenses. If a significant number of permanent licenses could be removed in step one, further rationalization could proceed more smoothly.

The second step would be to further limit the crab industry. Several different approaches are being contemplated. One might be a catch history-based or other type of comprehensive rationalization program that could include harvesters, processors and coastal communities. Another might be vessel cooperatives as used in the pollock fisheries. In either case, the moratorium on new individual fishing quota programs will need to be lifted by Congress. And crab cooperatives may need additional authorities from Congress.

Whatever path we take, we hope you will support our efforts to further rationalize these critical crab fisheries. We are committed to working toward the reduction of fishing capacity, which fully comports with NOAA Fisheries Strategic Plan to alleviate overcapitalization in 15% of federally managed fisheries by 2004. We hope you will join us in this effort which will set the stage for long term sustainability of the crab resources and the industry that depends on them.

Sincerely,

Richard B. Lauber
Chairman

cc: Congressional Delegations (AK, WA, OR)
State Governors and Fisheries Agencies